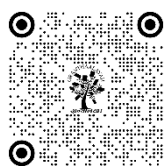


# EXPLORING SOCIAL SUBJECTIVITY IN DORIS LESSING'S AFRICAN STORIES

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## ABSTRACT

Doris Lessing's African Stories provide a compelling exploration of the intersections between individual consciousness and the larger socio-political realities of colonial and postcolonial Africa. This study investigates the concept of social subjectivity in her African narratives, focusing on how characters' identities are shaped, negotiated, and often fractured within complex structures of race, class, gender, and power. Lessing's stories not only foreground personal experiences but also reflect the tensions of colonial domination, cultural displacement, and the struggle for selfhood in oppressive social contexts. Through an ecocritical and postcolonial lens, this research examines how Lessing's characters embody the contradictions of belonging and alienation. The landscapes of Africa, described with both intimacy and estrangement, serve as a backdrop for examining the dynamics of social relations and individual subjectivity. Lessing's portrayal of African and European characters highlights the entangled realities of colonial encounter—where identity becomes inseparable from historical and cultural forces.

By engaging with themes of authority, marginality, and resistance, this work argues that Lessing's African Stories move beyond personal narratives to interrogate broader questions of social justice, identity formation, and cultural hybridity. Ultimately, the study reveals how Lessing situates subjectivity not as an isolated psychological condition but as a phenomenon deeply embedded in the social and political fabric of African life under colonial rule.

**Keywords:** Social Subjectivity, Doris Lessing, African Stories, Postcolonial Identity, Colonialism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing spent most of her first thirty years in South Africa, the "tough, sunburnt, virile, positive country contemptuous of subtleties and sensibility" described thus on the first page of this 700 page collection of shorter and longer stories. The majority are from earlier collections, such as *This Was the Old Chief's Country* and *Five* (the novellae) prefaced by the author's introduction; some have had no previous book publication. As she says in her introduction, some of them appeared at a time when "indignation about the colour bar in Africa had not yet become part of the furniture of the progressive conscience." But as any one familiar with her work (the early novel- *The Grass is Singing*; even the more recently published (here) *Martha Quest* books) know, Miss Lessing has always been sharply critical of the dichotomy between white and black and Africa has been a specific background for her intense political and social convictions. Her first story here which she describes as full of the "bile" she feels toward alien white colonials, deals with the rejected offertory of a painting of a Black Madonna by an Italian during the war.... It is an impressive collection, confirming the stringent sympathies of this writer which consistently represent protest and commitment.

*African Stories* were published in two volumes, *This Was The Old Chief's Country* and *The Sun Between Their Feet*. All these collections come to be collectively known as *African Stories*. Doris Lessing has spent most of the time of her life in Africa and has been impressed by the natural beauty of the Dark Continent- its landscapes, wild jackals, pigs and other creatures has impressed her throughout her life. This experience is quite visible in her writings about Africa. These stories about Africa are full of agony that she feels for African's, the bile she had for White Settlers who oppressed the

Black natives. She further goes on praising Africa for its atmosphere which she finds a chief gift from such a landscape to its writers. Doris Lessing is undoubtedly one among the powerful writers of her own century. She belongs to the circle of writer of the realistic tradition and has definitely explored the social, moral, political aspects which in turn affect the psychology of a character. Her works fall in the category of racism, feminism and her main concern was communism to work for the justice and equality of mankind irrespective of caste, colour, creed or sex. In most of her African stories, her main concern was to rule out the theme of alienation, theme of racism, injustice and oppression.

Lessing's fiction is much more concerned with her political involvement with the Communist Party. This involvement is evident in most of her works where she fought for the equality of these people. This short story collection includes every story about Africa contains Lessing's joys, agonies, and complexities of African life. Lessing has combined all her extraordinary work in this collection. Doris Lessing herself belonged to the British settlers of Rhodesia. Her father has bought thousand acres of farmland from the Matbele tribe of Rhodesia who were expelled from their homeland by these white settlers. As the time passes Lessing became aware about the racism in Africa. She became conscious of that how with the violence and threat these white settlers have taken the lands of the black natives brutally. She then took the stand to work for the justice of these oppressed natives. So, her stories are full of this anguish and the guilt. These colonials have oppressed most of the part in the world along with Africa. They consolidated their political power in Africa in the form of establishing companies in the Dark Continent and it automatically shifted the power under British rule. The natives were so tortured that they can't speak for their rights, if they did; they have to be dragged out of their native land.

Lessing has chosen Southern Rhodesia as the core of her African writings. It is the place where Lessing has experienced all the brutalities by the white settlers on black natives. Most of her work is autobiographical in nature. In her preface to *This Was the Old Chief's Country* 1964, this autobiographical element is as:

Writers brought up in Africa have many advantages- being at the centre of a modern battlefield; part of a society in rapid, dramatic change. But in a long run it can also be a handicap: to wake up every morning with one's eyes on a fresh evidence of inhumanity; to be reminded twenty times a day of injustice. (Lessing 8)

Lessing's main concern was to bring out the injustice that African faced, through her literature wants the attention of the whole world. Lessing has found this injustice by herself while living in the Africa, where she has spent most of her time.

Sites of Personal and Cultural Memories in Doris Lessing's Writings of Africa by Elena Anca Georgescu states this autobiographical element as:

In her fiction, Doris Lessing uses her own personal memories to create fiction that fits into the frame of cultural memory studies. She connects history and memory, by making sure that her memory is put in a critical, historical context, that of British colonial history. (Georgescu 164)

In her *African Stories*, Lessing has shown the injustice of African people. She believes in the equality of human beings which is the maxim of the Marxist philosophy. Throughout her life and writing career, she has followed this philosophy either by being an active activist of the Communist Party or by her writing. She herself belongs to the White settlers but was against the oppression by them to the natives. She wants to have justice for all, "Truly to understand, we have to lose the arrogance that is the white man's burden, to stop feeling superior." (Lessing 9). This is the Communistic approach of Lessing which shows that all human beings are equal, no one is superior. The *African Stories* has two volumes, *This Was the Old Chief's Country* and *The Sun Between Their Feet*. The stories in these collections reflect her life long memories about Africa and give a clear picture of White Settlers and the Black natives. Lessing has represented the discrimination and injustice by Whites to Blacks in a colonial society. Lessing is considered as a powerful realistic writer exploring the facets of social, political and psychological of her century. Lessing's short stories have perfectly explored these facets. The stories reflect the discrimination between individuals on the basis of colour and class leading towards fragmentation and alienation of most of the characters. This all is because of the apartheid in Africa, where one human being doesn't find other as a human but like an animal. White settlers in Africa believe that the Blacks natives can't breathe the same air as by the Whites. Thus they became cruel in their behaviour towards the natives. In her preface 1964 to African Stories volume 1, *This Was the Old Chief's Country*, Lessing experiences these cruelties as:

And the cruelties of the white man towards the black man are among the heaviest counts in the indictment against humanity, colour prejudice is not our original fault, but only one aspect of the atrophy of the imagination that prevents us from seeing ourselves in every creature that breathes under the sun. (Lessing 8)

In most of her African stories, her main concern was to rule out the theme of alienation, theme of racism, injustice and oppression. Lessing took the stand to work for the justice of these oppressed natives. So, her stories are full of this anguish and the guilt. These colonials have oppressed most of the part in the world along with Africa. They consolidated their political power in Africa in the form of establishing companies in the Dark Continent and it automatically shifted the power under British rule. The natives were so tortured that they can't speak for their rights, if they did; they have to be dragged out of their native land. Lessing has chosen Southern Rhodesia as the core of her African writings. It is the place where Lessing has experienced all the brutalities by the white settlers on black natives. Lessing is well known writer of twentieth century as a social writer writing for the society of African people, a political writer as having communistic approach in her writings and as a psychological writer, writing about the psychology of its characters who has been the victims of the oppression on the basis of colour.

In a story titled *The Old Chief Mshlanga* has shown in clear terms the oppression of the Whites to Blacks. Lessing wants to make world aware of the oppression and injustice that people face only because one race of humans treating them superior while others as inferior. When the story *The Old Chief Mshlanga* begins, the narrator is a white girl whose father like other British's has a large unused farm. The blacks were to serve the white settlers. There was a gap between blacks and whites and even the children were taught the same injustice. The narrator states it as, "The black people on the farm were as remote as the trees and the rocks. They were an amorphous black mass, mingling and thinning and massing like tadpoles, faceless, who existed merely to serve, to say 'Yes, Bass,' take their money and go" (Lessing 14).

Lessing has always been a self defined writer as Africa gave her the opportunities to explore possibilities of spiritual growth for the social and political development. Africans were exploited by the white settlers for a quite a long period of time. Lessing wants to bring a change and this change is visible in these African stories. Lessing exposed this racism. Her stories show the injustice to the natives in their own country. One of such example is shown through the image of White girl-the protagonist in the story of "*Old Chief Mshlanga*." Lessing's firm belief in Marxist philosophy made her to think in a different way. The two volumes of *African Stories* reflect her personal experiences perfectly depicting the picture of white and black societies. Since the beginning of this world, literature has always remained as a medium to show the violence of the world.

Lessing's dilemma is the vexed one of all white settler writings, viewed from the post-colonial perspective. How much is it possible to represent the Other? Or, to reframe the question in a way that at least allows for the power of the imagination: how much of those whose experiences one is excluded from by the situation in which one is brought up is it possible to find in oneself? The urge to rewrite the colonial past as a result of the promptings of creative nostalgia poses an acute challenge, which Lessing cannot always meet – as she realizes, struggling with new kinds of narrative, while circling back to the ancient and, she clearly hopes, universal fundamentals of storytelling, variously embodied in epic, legend or fantasy. That Lessing is able at times to overcome the dilemma is, I think, clear. It is a function of how far she manages to balance the regressive tendencies of nostalgia, with its progressive, historically informed potential. What is surprising and impressive is that it did not require a long career of writing for this to emerge.

To reinforce the point, I should like now to turn to "The Old Chief Mshlanga", the first words of which are also the first words of the first volume of *Collected African Stories*. The opening strikes a poignant note:

"They were good, the years of ranging the bush over her father's farm which, like every white farm, was largely unused ...".(13) This is clearly more than simple, sentimental nostalgia, as the immediate hint of the profligacy of colonial possession suggests, a hint to be taken up later, when the whole issue of land ownership moves towards the centre of the tale, and the process of exploitation is delineated in a way that takes readers through the screens of what may well be an initially unfamiliar time and place towards an understanding that puts its foreignness into a perspective which connects us to it. By "us", I mean the reader who can now compare the situation outlined in the tale with others analogous to it, for example that of the lonely heroine of Nadine Gordimer's semi-fictionalized early self in *The Lying Days*, published in 1953, two years after the first appearance of "The Old Chief Mshlanga". Helen Shaw remains imprisoned in her narcissistic whiteness, whereas Lessing's farm girl develops a more questioning perspective. At first the girl sings "Out flew the web and floated wide, the mirror cracked from side to side", she is a latter-day Lady of Shalott imprisoned in the castle of her isolated consciousness, unable to see the gaunt and violent landscape for what it is, any more than she can perceive the black people on the farm as anything but an amorphous mass, changing like the seasons, existing to serve whites like herself, the "Nkosikaas", or chieftainness, as they are obliged to call her.(14)

Lessing through her writings has brought out the violence of the most civilized people of the world. She has witnessed violence of the World Wars and the aftermaths of them, firstly through her father and secondly by herself- the

biggest problems that is confronted by everyone. This violence can't be ignored any more. It is through the works of Doris Lessing dared to confront with this reality of violence. As stated by Elena Anca Georgescu, "‘War,’ Doris Lessing once declared, ‘has been then most important thing’ in her life. Her fiction repeatedly affirms this observation, for war, in its multiple guises insistently marches across the pages of Lessing's text, leaving ruin in its wake" (Georgescu 164). Injustice on the basis of colour occurred in the countries where people of different races live together. This injustice is because one race dominated the other. Africa is one of the examples of this injustice where white people oppressed the natives (blacks). Akhter and Batta in their research paper have shown that, "Lessing has made her protagonist her mouth piece to bring out the true picture of her society in which she lived herself. After analysing the short story it clearly shows the autobiographical elements of Lessing personal life". (Akhter and Batta, p. 27-28)

In another story *The Nuisance*, the discrimination can be understood when the narrator says that the natives can play apes, so as to amuse us and our parents, "but he would never play the ape, as some Africans did, for our amusement" (Lessing, *The Nuisance* 70). The narrator further states that:

For there were two wells. The new one, used by ourselves, had fresh sparkling water that was sweet in the mouth; . . . the water of other well had a faintly unpleasant taste and was pale brown . . . Next day there came a deputation from the women of the compound. Half a dozen of them stood at the back door, arguing that if the well wasn't cleaned soon, all the children would be sick. 'I'll do it next week,' he promised, with bad grace. (72)

The discrimination doesn't end here when they came to know that the driver's wife has committed suicide instead of feeling pity for his driver, he blames his wife as, "Last of all the Long One (driver) went down to fetch up her head, which was missing. 'I thought you said your wife had gone home?' said my father. 'I thought she had. Where else could she have gone?' 'Well,' said my father at last, disgusted by the whole thing, 'if she had to kill herself, why couldn't she hang herself on a tree, instead of spoiling the well?' (73).

Lessing further goes on stating of this discrimination in the story *No Witchcraft for Sale*, which she gives through the character of Gideon. Gideon finds it his duty to serve the whites. He has been brought up in a missionary and there he has been taught that colour difference decides the duty of a person. Gideon taught the same thing to his son as:

Gideon's youngest son, who was now a herdsboy, came especially up from the compound to see the scooter. He was afraid to come near it, but Teddy showed off in front of him. 'Piccanin,' shouted Teddy, 'get out of my way!' And he raced in circles around the black child until he was frightened, and fled back to the bush. 'Why did you frighten him?' asked Gideon, gravely reproachful. Teddy said defiantly: 'He's only a black boy, 'and laughed. (Lessing 36)

The story reveals the policy behind the behaviour of these whites towards the natives. Through these stories, Lessing has collectively depicted the feelings and sufferings of all the natives who have felt the victims of white supremacy. The social problems can only be solved by making the consciousness of people clear about their actions and their reactions.

## 2. CONCLUSION

After analysing Doris Lessing's select African Stories, it is quite clear that Lessing has made her protagonist her mouth piece to bring out the true picture of her society in which she lived herself. After analysing these short stories, the autobiographical elements of Lessing personal and social life are clearly visible. Through her characters she wants to bring a change in the society that she dreams of in her real life. Dissatisfied with the behaviour of the people of race only on the basis of colour made Lessing revolt against their own people and society.

Doris Lessing is a realistic writer who never hesitated to jot down the reality of the cruel treatment to people on the base of colour or race, domination of one person on another, male domination on females etc. Whenever the reader reads her works, he/she feels like a true incident is happening in front of him/her. The reason behind it is that she has observed all this in her life, had faced the cruelties of colonialism, racism and apartheid. All this brings a positive variation in her themes. These stories suggest its readers try to eradicate all types of inequality among people because everyone has equal right to live. She has always focused to convey her views about the problems of a group of people by using her artistic taste and people to accept it by her creativity of mixing reality with fiction which was her motif.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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